



JULY 2004

Greetings,

The Veterans' Update is a newsletter created to keep you abreast of veterans' issues and legislation in Washington, as well as developments and improvements in Florida's Fifth Congressional District.

Last month I had the pleasure of cutting the ribbon on the expanded, state-of-the-art veterans healthcare clinic in Brooksville. The clinic, located at the Pinebrook Regional Medical Center, was tripled in size and offers a host of services including an on-site pharmacist. In Washington, a bill I authored and promoted passed the U.S. House. We also passed legislation allowing thousands of military survivors to receive increased annuities under the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP), also known as "The Widow's Tax."

This update will highlight these developments, as well as the new Korean Defense Service Medal. I hope you continue to enjoy receiving this mailing and that you'd contact me with any questions or concerns you may have about veterans' issues important to you.

**AN EXPANDED, IMPROVED VA CLINIC –
OTHER EXPANSIONS ON THE WAY**

Improving veterans' healthcare has been my top priority in Congress. Central Florida attracts more and more of our nation's heroes every day and the critical expansion in Hernando County will now bring them better service in a more timely fashion. The Pinebrook facility was nearly tripled in size from 2,770 to 8,285 square feet. It now provides primary care, nutrition counseling, mental health, audiology, social work services, podiatry and houses an on-site pharmacist for medication counseling. I am honored to have played a role in providing quality care to those who have defended our nation and continue to work with the VA to expand other clinics throughout the Fifth Congressional District.

PROTECTING SURVIVORS' BENEFITS

On May 20th I voted in favor of the House passed legislation allowing military survivors to receive the increased annuities they deserve under the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP). After hearing from many local veterans about how important SPB reform was, I have been fighting alongside fellow Florida Representative Jeff Miller to correct the SBP inequity for the past year and a half. In the Budget Committee I worked to ensure that sufficient funding for the provision would be available in anticipation that Congress would finally pass SBP reform this year.

That prospect became a reality last month, and the provision will phase out the reduction in benefits in the SBP. The provision responds to the inequity that is experienced by the vast majority of military survivors, who face a reduction from 55% to 35% in their SBP annuities at age 62. When soldiers serve in the U.S. military, their families make sacrifices as well. Depriving them of the funds that they rightfully deserve is outright unfair. As a result of House Republican action, that injustice will soon end.

VA HOME LOAN BILL PASSES U.S. HOUSE

This June, a bill I authored, the Veterans Housing Affordability Act, passed the U.S. House. The bill, H.R. 4345, will allow veterans better access to realizing the American dream of home ownership. Housing prices currently rise by a national average of eight percent every year. Veterans defended and served the entire nation; the value of their housing benefit should not vary depending on their local housing market, nor should it stagnate while housing prices soar.

The VA home loan guarantee is currently capped at \$240,000, but this bill increases the maximum home loan by indexing it to the Freddie Mac conforming loan rate (currently \$333,700). This not only increases the veterans' housing benefit to an amount more realistic for today's housing market, it also allows the benefit to increase as the housing market continues to rise. Furthermore, the bill is actually forecasted to save tax-payer dollars by generating additional revenue. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the bill will save \$39 million in 2005 and \$208 million over five years.

Now that my bill has passed the House, the Senate must pass it before President Bush can sign it into law. We owe our nation's heroes adequate access to the American dream they have been fighting to protect. You should contact your Senators and urge them to take up and pass this important legislation for veterans all over the country.

THE KOREAN DEFENSE SERVICE MEDAL

For more than 50 years, the efforts of the brave men and women of our Armed Forces to deter and defend the Korean Peninsula have helped maintain democracy and preserve the spirit of freedom. The Korean Defense Service Medal (KDSM) is a new award to give special recognition for the sacrifices and contributions of those who have served or are serving in the Republic of Korea. In order to send a request for the KDSM, veterans will need to provide a copy of their DD-214 or other records showing their Korean military service time. Veterans must have served in Korea for 30 consecutive days or 60 non-consecutive after July 28, 1954 to qualify for the KDSM. All interested, eligible veterans should contact my office for assistance in being honored with this award for their service by calling toll free at 1-866-G-WAITE-5.

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